

The Man on the Moon

1.

Harvey Jennings went to the window and peered across at the dish, its huge crescent of steel glowing beneath a chunky, shadowed moon. He again paid tribute, as he habitually did, to the planners and engineers who'd built the apparatus, acknowledging the brilliance of its engineering. It was a thing of beauty, the scope. The structure was precise, a lacework of fine steel held in place by huge hydraulic arms, the dish's polished skin glistening in the moonlight, the tri-pedal nose of the central antenna pointing squarely at the spectacular half-orb overhead.

When he looked up at the moon, he marvelled at its clarity; on that score too, he thought, the planners had got it right. The site was excellent: the atmosphere almost always clear, a prism through which light and sound passed with minimal distortion.

That was what bothered him: if there was nothing out of order at the scope site - if the conditions were good and the coordinates were correct - where else could the signal have come from?

He walked briskly back around the circular mezzanine to the scope's control room. Mark Albright, the only other technician on duty, was busy at the console on the ground floor. Harvey closed the door to the control room and went over the desk, rolling into the desk chair as he studied the figures displayed on the monitor. The sequence of digits confirmed what he'd expected; the dish was precisely where it ought to be, on the southern extremity of the Sea of Tranquility, on the Moon's surface. To Harvey the apparent conclusion didn't make sense: there'd been no lunar expeditions in that area for over ten years, certainly no crewed landings.

After staring blankly for a moment at the screen, Harvey leaned forward and pecked the screen. The second of two large spools of magnetic tape on the wall behind - the first was already in slow circulation - went through a deft series of rotations then slowly began turning in synch with its partner. There was a sharp hiss through the speakers above Harvey's head. After several seconds, the static was cut off abruptly by a male voice, its accent unmistakably American:

"Ah, this is Genesis One. 24243 locked on."

A second voice, again American, responded. "24243 confirmed, Genesis One. Vertice is 2221."

There was a short pause. "2221 confirmed and locked on. We have the target."

"Copy. Status?"

"Ahh... the target is mobile, travelling on foot."

"Inventory?"

“RPG’s, looks like six; couple of pack animals - probably supplies and munitions.”

“Copy. Set target, copy and lock.”

A brief pause. A third voice intervened. “Target set, copied and locked.”

“Enact.”

Another brief hiss of static. “Enacted at... 0219.02.”

“Genesis One, this is Genesis Base confirmed.”

“Copy that. Regards to terra firma.”

There was an abrupt wall of white noise. Harvey arrested the audio, got out of his chair and straightened slowly, arching his back. His tall, lean frame threw fractured shadows across the walls as he moved about, thinking things through. He had little doubt about the authenticity of the signal; the scope’s antennae were too finely tuned to pick up ambient signals from terrestrial or airborne transmitters. Authenticity was one thing; what troubled him more were the implications: the apparent source of the signal, and the question of why the scope had picked up the message at all.

The transmission was clearly military and probably, Harvey reasoned, highly sensitive; such communications were always heavily encrypted, and although the scope might occasionally register the short bursts of ultra-low frequency static that signalled the passage of information from orbiting military satellites or high-altitude aircraft, deciphering the scrambled contents was well beyond the capability of the scope’s decoders. Something had gone wrong with the process, but that affect the conclusion to which Harvey was drawn: that the source of the signal was something – a military facility of some kind – on the lunar surface.

He wished he hadn’t been the one to pick up the signal; to Harvey, the intercepted message was more of a inconvenience than anything else: having received it, he’d now have to do something about it. If there was a fault in the Americans’ encryption process, then Neil Grimes, the facility’s director, would certainly need to be told.

Harvey didn’t relish the prospect. The director had accountabilities that went well beyond the activities of a single scope; he headed the national network of installations, all fourteen of the major scopes including an interface with Pine Gap. It was Grimes who’d coordinated all inter-facility activity during the lunar landings. Grimes would want an extensive briefing, and the man’s intolerance of those who failed to provide adequate reports or overlooked obvious possibilities, was legendary.

Harvey had no intention of inviting such professional humiliation. He leaned forward and tapped the console again. A time-lapse exposure of a section of the night’s sky slowly layered itself onto the screen. Any moving objects such as meteorites, satellites, high-flying aircraft that entered the scope’s catchment that night would, Harvey knew, appear on the image as white streaks. But there were no tell-tale tracers; nothing, apparently, had crossed the precincts of the Scope’s main antenna.

With another couple of taps on the screen, Harvey brought another image – a section of the lunar surface – into view. He manipulated the image until the massive crater of Plinius sat like a watermark in the centre of the screen. A small red dot on the crater’s rim identified the current focus of the scope. He zoomed in on the spot, studying it, then on impulse copied the coordinates onto his jotter pad.

He was still bent over the console when the door of the control room opened. Albright entered, carrying a mug of coffee. With another quick, seemingly nonchalant tap, Harvey changed the image on the screen to a scrolling series of digits. Albright wandered over and stood a few paces behind Harvey, gingerly sipping at the edge of the cup as he gazed at the console.

“Checking frequencies?” he asked conversationally.

“Uh-huh,” Harvey replied, without looking up.

Albright grunted. Like Harvey, he understood the relentless intensity of having to meticulously check every aspect of their work. It went with the almost limitless patience that astronomical research required: always checking and re-checking, rather than miss something that could turn out to be significant. It was an unwritten protocol of the observatory not to distract anyone doing a check, and Albright eventually drifted away, slurping his cooling brew.

Harvey eased himself back in the chair, holding his open hand to his forehead and massaging the skin between thumb and forefinger. It was a habit he’d formed in his youth, longer ago than he could remember. Angela called it his ‘Thinker’ pose.

He stayed like that for several minutes, then abruptly picked up the phone. It was time to make it Grimes’ problem.

He winced at the irritable edge in the director’s voice when he eventually picked up the phone. “It’s Harvey, sir, from the Scope. I’m sorry to call so late, but you said to let you know if anything ... well, problematic, came up, and I think it just might have.” Harvey paused briefly to collect his thoughts. “I’ve picked up a signal, a sensitive one, I think, an American military communication. It seems there’s a fault with their encryptors. I thought you should know.” He hesitated. “I guess if we can pick it up, others can.”

Grimes digested the information. “Are you at the Scope?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me hear it.”

Harvey patched the message into the conversation. When Grimes came back on the line, his voice had a business-like quality. “Okay. What’s the trajectory on that?”

Harvey hesitated. “Ah... well, that’s the thing, sir; there doesn’t appear to be one. There’s no sign of movement on the grid; the source seemed to be stable.”

Grimes grunted. “Something in fixed orbit, something in the antenna’s line of fire?”

“Well, that’s what I thought, sir, but when I ran a trace on the source position, nothing showed up.”

“No other communications in the zone?”

“Nothing.” Harvey hastily proffered his conclusion. “Sir, I think the signal came from the lunar surface.”

There was another pause, longer this time. “Okay,” Grimes said at last, a little cautiously. The line was silent for several seconds. “Look, I’ll need to take this up with Canberra; I’m sure the Minister’ll want to let the Americans know sooner rather than later if they’re spreading their military communications half-way around the world. Crawley can take it up with the Yanks - let them sort it out.” He cleared his throat. “In the meantime, just keep this to yourself, Harvey, you understand? We’re bound by the Official Secrets Act on this.”

“Got it,” Harvey said.

“Get me a copy of the track – a CD’ll do – and drop it straight around, will you? I’d like to have it on hand when I make the call.” The director paused again. “You’d better keep the spools under wraps, too. Lock them in the safe till we get this sorted out.”

Harvey did as he’d been asked. As soon as he got off the phone, he punched a CD into the console and transferred the communication across. As an afterthought, he slipped another CD into the machine and dubbed a second copy, which he secured in the safe with the spools.

On the drive to Grimes’ place, Harvey had time to study the shadowed orb of the moon through the windscreen. He located the grey ring of Plinius; it would make sense, he thought, to locate a base on the crater rim, above the dust. With the doors of conjecture opened, Harvey found himself considering other possibilities: if there was one base, might there not be others, a network of installations. He thought of Angela and the kids, and a shiver of apprehension ran through him: what impact might such an apparatus have on their lives? On everyone’s lives, come to that?

Grimes was waiting in the driveway, his thick frame silhouetted against the porch light. He took the CD Harvey handed him. “I’ll take it from here,” he said, glancing at his watch. “You’re due off at six. It’s not far off that now. You might as well head home.”

Harvey accepted the release thankfully, and drove quickly across town to his home. He killed the lights as he pulled into the bush-lined drive. The moon had ebbed below the horizon, its afterglow fading before the creeping dawn. He slunk past the rooms of his son and infant daughter, and quietly undressed. He was about to slip into bed beside his wife when his mobile phone began to burr quietly.

The caller was Neil Grimes. He sounded agitated.

“Thought I’d try to catch you before you turned in,” he said. “Look, this transmission business... there’s more to it than meets the eye, apparently. They want me to go to Canberra ASAP – tonight, in fact. I’m leaving now; they’ve organised a charter flight. Sorry to leave you with this at such short notice, Harvey, but you’ll have to supervise at the scope while I’m

away. It'll mean a double shift, but you can take time in lieu when I get back. Anything urgent comes up, call me." Grimes' breathing slowed. "Thanks for your prompt action on this; you've handled it well."

For two days Harvey heard nothing further about the matter. Then word came that Grimes had been killed, in a plane crash on the way back from Canberra.

2.

Grimes' death was a shock to Harvey, but any implications beyond the immediate had to be put aside when the Minister's office rang the following morning to advise him that, until Grimes could be formally replaced as manager, Harvey had been seconded to the role. Before the call ended, Harvey took the opportunity to ask whether any action had been taken regarding the lunar transmission.

The pleasant-sounding woman on the other end of the line asked him to hold. After a moment's pause, a male voice came on the line. "Mister Jennings? Jonathon Crawley. How are things going out there?"

Harvey was taken aback. He'd been in the presence of the Minister of Communications on a couple of occasions, but had had no previous personal contact with him. "Um... fine, sir."

Crawley hummed thoughtfully, then said: "This signal business. Had Grimes spoken to you about that?"

"Yes, sir. I'm the one who gave him the information. I only passed it on after I'd run every kind of check I could think of. I thought it was worth pursuing."

"Indeed," Crawley said. "You did the right thing. The advice I'm getting from the people in Defence is that it's a new kind of spy satellite, fitted with some sort of anti-detection device, something we can't pick up."

Harvey had already considered this possibility and discounted it. "I don't think it's a satellite, sir. I've checked the lag in the transmission times between the two audio sources. It confirmed what I suggested to Grimes: that the signal came from the lunar surface."

The silence this time was more prolonged, and there was an edge in the Minister's voice when he finally replied. "I see. All right, Mister Jennings, thank you for your diligence. I'm sure you'll appreciate there are obvious security implications – significant implications – in the hypothesis you're putting forward, and I'd like to ensure it's checked again by our people down here before we go shouting it from the rooftops. So I'd like your absolute assurance that you'll discuss it with nobody, at least until we've got confirmation, and maybe not even then. Any matter of urgency or extreme importance related to the matter should be escalated directly to me. Are we agreed on that?" When Harvey concurred, Crawley went on briskly: "Good. Your cooperation on this won't go unacknowledged. I assume you'll be putting your hand up as Grimes replacement when the position comes up?"

“Yes, I suppose... I hadn't really thought about it.”

“Well, you'd certainly have my support,” Crawley said candidly.

Harvey muttered his thanks. He decided not to pursue the matter of the signal any further.

There was a slightly awkward pause before Crawley said: “Look, it's been a hell of a few days for you, Harvey, dealing with all this - Grimes' death on top of everything else. Once things've got back on an even keel up there, why don't you take a few days off? Albright can look after things at the scope, at least in the short term. Take your family down to the coast; enjoy a bit of this good weather we've been having.”

Harvey accepted the offer gratefully. It had been a long time since he'd had any kind of vacation, and he knew the strain of the extended shifts had been telling on both him and Angela; the posting to the Kaputar scope had been a promotion for him, but the upheaval of moving and re-settling the kids had been difficult for her. There wasn't much Grimes had been doing that couldn't be deferred for a while. He rang Angela with the news straight away, briefed Albright on the reporting protocols, then went home and started making the necessary arrangements. Being outside the normal holiday peaks, accommodation was easy to find: a comfortable bungalow right on the beach. Angela got the kids time out of school; there was mounting excitement in the household as the packing commenced. By six the next morning they were in the car and headed for the coast.

The holiday was everything Harvey hoped it would be: long, languid breakfasts on the veranda while the kids played about on the sand below; strolls along the beach, paddling and swimming in the still-tepid water; checking out the shops and cafes along the esplanade. It re-ignited the fire of their relationships, brought them all back into that circle of intimacy they'd almost forgotten they'd shared.

In the manner of all such holidays, it seemed endless at the beginning and too short at the end. Before they knew it, it was over. Still, it had worked wonders, and Harvey felt loose and comfortable when he climbed into the station wagon to begin the journey home. Then, halfway up the mountain to Dorrigo, a truck nearly ran them off the road.

At first, Harvey thought it might have been accidental: the driver losing control on the narrow bend as he tried to overtake; maybe someone under the influence, the vehicle attempting to pass then slewing sharply in front of the family's car, the rear of the truck's tailgate colliding violently with the left-hand fender. The steering wheel jumped unexpectedly in Harvey's grip, and only a miraculous combination of reflexes on his part prevented them from plunging over the edge of the precipice.

Any doubt that the collision had been intentional vanished when, from a couple of metres in front, the truck's tail-lights suddenly came on and the vehicle braked abruptly, its tailgate again swinging savagely back towards the car. The second impact wedged the station wagon's fender against the front tyre, the terrified occupants screaming as the car veered savagely to the left, bringing them to a crushing halt against the embankment.

Harvey checked Angela and the children, relieved to find them shaken but otherwise okay. He tumbled out of the car, light-headed with shock. The truck went a hundred metres further up

the road and stopped. A head poked out the driver's window, but withdrew quickly when a snaking line of traffic appeared around the bend below. The truck revved its motor and disappeared around the upper bends.

The station wagon protruded across one lane of the narrow road, and before long a queue of traffic had built up in both directions. Harvey found himself cast reluctantly in the role of traffic controller as the lines of curious travellers crawled past in the single remaining lane. He collected himself sufficiently to try calling triple-zero, but there was no reception. In the end, he asked one of the passers-by to report the incident when they reached the nearest town.

When the police arrived, Harvey was able to give them the few details he could recall of the truck. Curiously, he was able to recollect the registration plate - a skill, he supposed, that derived from years of memorising the numerous digits needed to coordinate and analyse the scope's information.

He persuaded the officers to send the registration details through to their base. Whatever action was subsequently taken, it was clearly insufficient to intercept the vehicle, for in the following hours and throughout the couple of days' delay it took to get the car back on the road, he heard nothing further. When he got home, he rang the State Motor Registry about the truck's ownership, but they advised him that the plates he was looking for belonged to a vehicle that had been written off some years before, and that the plates had not been re-issued. In frustration, he contacted the Police Commissioner's office, but they fobbed him off with an empty promise of a return call. After a couple of weeks of fruitless calls, he decided to try a short cut.

Askin Herbert had been a friend of Harvey's for several years, since they'd met at a faculty party at university and hit it off. Harvey had since come to appreciate, through the pair's joint attendance at numerous scientific award functions, that Askin was a leading light in the computer programming field. The two of them had long since got past the stage of curiosity about what they did on a day-to-day basis, but Harvey supposed that Askin, through his work in cyber-security with one of the big multinationals, might have the necessary expertise to delve further into the mystery of the truck's registration number. When Harvey explained what he was seeking and why he wanted it, Askin hadn't taken a lot of convincing to agree to do what he jokingly described as the 'hack work.'

It hadn't taken him long to get a result, either. Within minutes of beginning the quest, Askin was able to turn to his friend and say: "There's nothing here, Harvey. See for yourself; according to the register, that number plate doesn't exist." He shrugged off his companion's uncomprehending stare. "Maybe you made a mistake."

Harvey sagged into a chair, staring fixedly ahead. Was it possible? No. Askin might know everything there was to know about programming, but Harvey knew about memorising digits. It was the major part of his job; almost all the data he worked with was digital, sheets of letters and numbers, and he'd become adept at retaining and recalling it. Trauma notwithstanding, he'd had plenty of time to imprint the sequence on the vehicle's registration plate.

Harvey was baffled. The truck had been a relatively late-model vehicle; how could the plate not exist? When he voiced the question, his friend shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe it's a straight-out fake." Askin turned back to the keyboard. "Anyway, I'd better get out of here; this

is strictly out-of-bounds stuff.” He waited until the screen went blank, then put his hands behind his head and swivelled to face Harvey. “So... what now?”

Harvey grimaced and shook his head. “No idea; I guess it’s a dead end.” He cradled his forehead in his hand, thinking. “I don’t get it. Why would anyone want to do that, run us off the road like that?”

3.

In the days following Grimes’ death, Harvey trawled through the events of the previous couple of weeks, trying to work out his best option. The official explanation for the plane crash was that it was due to a ‘technical failure’; beyond that, the only information given was that the matter was ‘under investigation.’ Harvey thought about digging deeper, ringing Crawley’s office and asking for a more substantive explanation, but he decided against it. Similarly, he shied away from raising the matter of the incident on the mountain with the Minister; there was something – a niggling residue of threat – from his earlier discussion with the Crawley that persuaded Harvey not to pursue it. Still, the recollection of the event broke into his consciousness at unexpected moments: the image of the truck’s swinging tailgate and the shock of the impact triggering an instant cold sweat at odd times during his shift or jarring him awake in a panic from deep sleep.

The longer Harvey mulled over these events and the choices they left him, the more apparent it became that doing nothing - keeping his mouth shut and just going on with his work as if nothing had happened – was no longer one of them. If Askin was right, if there was some kind of cloak and dagger stuff going on related to Harvey’s discovery, then he needed to do something to protect himself. But what? He’d ruled Crawley out. Should he go to the police? He’d already tried that once and drawn a blank, perhaps an intentional one. It was quite possible, as Askin had pointed out, that the police could be in on it, covering the matter up in the interests of ‘national security’.

He met with Askin again and went over the affair with him, trying to work out a way forward. In the end they agreed that Harvey’s best hope – perhaps his only one – was to get the information into the hands of someone who could get it into the public spotlight; create enough publicity to give Harvey and his family a measure of protection. They talked about going straight to the media with the story, but neither of them had any contacts in the industry, and they agreed it was too fraught with risk to simply hand it to an editor: among the mainstream media there were sure to be referral protocols covering matters of national security.

Then Harvey remembered Natasha Viktorovska. Natasha was a life-long friend, part of a Russian immigrant family who’d moved in a couple of doors from his place in Sydney when they were kids. Their friendship began at primary school and went on through high school, surviving the traumas of a brief, exploratory romance and subsequent marriages to different partners. When Harvey’s career had taken him away to various remote postings around the country, he’d lost regular contact with her; but they’d run into one another occasionally at family-and-friends’ gatherings, and the familiarity was still there. Most of the news he’d heard about her recently came from the media, when she’d unexpectedly picked up a Senate seat as an Independent in the federal election. She’d been elected based on what was, by current political standards, a fairly radical program. It occurred to Harvey that her position might offer a possible avenue for exposure.

He rang her parliamentary office the following morning from a phone in the scope's canteen, but had to satisfy himself with an assurance from her clerical assistant that his request for a return call would be passed on as soon as possible. The mobile rang less than ten minutes later. Natasha's greeting was confident and familiar: "Hey, Harv, how're things?"

Harvey wasted no time getting to the point of his call. He told her everything - the intercepted military signal and its source, his suspicions about what might have happened to Grimes, his discussion with the Minister, the incident on the road. He stated his conclusion emphatically: that the Americans were operating a military installation of some kind from the surface of the moon.

When he finished, there was a long pause before Natasha said: "Jesus Christ, Harvey. Have you told anyone else about this?"

"Only Grimes and Crawley." He thought of Askin, but let it pass. "I need to speak to someone who can help me deal with this, Tash." He tried to control the tremor in his voice. "I thought of you."

There was another moment's silence. "Okay," Natasha said at last, "just let me think." Another pause, longer. "Look, the main thing I'm going to need is evidence. What have you got?"

"There's a back-up CD of the transmission in the safe at the scope."

"Can you get hold of it?"

Harvey grimaced. "I can; but it'd be breaking every rule in the book, and god knows how many national security laws as well."

"Sounds to me like you're already doing that. How soon can you get it to me?"

"To Canberra?" Harvey considered for a moment. "I can bring it down."

"Is there a flight from where you are?"

"No, only charters. Anyway ..." - he thought of Grimes - "...I'm not sure I want to take a chance on that after what's happened. I'd feel safer driving; I could be there in four or five hours."

"You'd better come straight to my place. I've got a flat, one of the perks of having to live away from home when the house is sitting."

She gave him an address and a phone number. There was a slow release of tension. Something of their old camaraderie flowed between them. "Okay... well, take care, Harv. It'll be nice to see you again. Just be careful. If half of what you've told me is true, they could already be on to you."

"Thanks," Harvey replied grimly, and hung up.

He didn't tell Angela much, only that he'd been called to Canberra on business, a term she knew covered everything confidential in the scope's political orbit. She didn't consider the urgency of the trip particularly unusual; such interruptions were a familiar part of their lives, something that went with the territory of living with a highly-regarded astronomer. He hoped, privately, that removing himself from his family's proximity might reduce the immediate risk to them while he got things worked out.

He threw a couple of things into his overnight bag, said a hasty goodbye to Angela and drove out to the scope. There were no problems; his pass still let him into the building as usual, and when he entered the dome, the only staff on duty were a couple of junior technicians, working on something on the lower floor. They merely nodded and went on with their work.

Harvey entered into the control room and slid into the seat in front of the console. As soon as he felt comfortable that he could move around unnoticed, he went to the safe, extracted the disk he'd left there and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Albright wasn't rostered on until the afternoon, but Harvey rang him from the desk and asked him to fill in.

He got back in the car and drove several kilometres down the highway in the opposite direction to Canberra, then turned off onto one of the back roads and drove back the way he'd come. The gravel surface was badly pot-holed, and the diversion took longer than he'd anticipated. It was after ten when he reached the capital, the city gleaming under a frigid, late autumn sky. The desolate, leaf-bereft streets made him feel particularly conspicuous as he drove across the lake to Capitol Hill. On one occasion, he was stopped at a set of traffic lights when a police car drifted to a stop alongside, causing his heart to flutter in panic; but the occupants of the cruiser didn't appear to notice him.

A small light was burning on Natasha's porch when he drove up to the address she'd given him. It was a small, leafy place surrounded by high brick walls, one of a number of similar two-storied apartments occupying a stylish medium-density development. Natasha didn't approve of political featherbedding, but she'd accepted the apartment as a reasonable trade-off for the time she had to spend away from her family.

She met him on the steps, her body shivering as she gave him an affectionate hug. The scent of her, the feel of her long, dark hair falling around his face, reminded him, uncomfortably, of times when they'd known each other more intimately. It startled him to realise that, even after their long absence, he still missed her.

An open fire was burning in the small dining room, and Harvey hovered over it while Natasha made coffee. They sat at the table, drinking. After a brief period of banter and recollections, Harvey extracted the CD from his pocket and handed it across. "That's it: the message, the coordinates, the tracking scans; everything's there." Harvey groaned and arched his back, stretching. "It's great to have your help with this, Tash. I'm really grateful."

She shrugged. "What are friends for? The thing now is, what to do with this."

Harvey studied her intently. "What do you reckon?"

Natasha pursed her lips. "I've already set up a meeting with Michaelson, the shadow Defence Minister, for nine tomorrow morning, just to feel him out. It's too soon to let him know exactly what we've got, but I'd like to test the water. After that I've teed up sessions with the Greens

and a couple of the other Independents, to put them in the picture. And then..."—she shrugged — "...well, I guess we'll have to wait and see. If there's nothing from Michaelson by lunch-time tomorrow, I'll take it directly to the floor of the Senate. Then the shit'll hit the fan." She got up and gathered the empty cups from the coffee table, pausing to study him. "So how are you, Harv? It's been a while."

A thin smile wrinkled Harvey's mouth. "Pretty contented, I guess," he replied, then nodded at the CD she was holding. "...until this came along, anyway."

She smiled. "Maybe we can do lunch tomorrow, after the meetings; I can fill you in. In the meantime, we'd better get some sleep." She nodded towards the hallway. "The spare room's down the hall, bathroom on the right."

Harvey collected his bag from the car and brought it inside. He fell asleep almost instantly, listening to the quiet sounds of Natasha's movements in the room upstairs.

The insistent peep of his mobile awoke him. Opening his eyes, he saw the bright cracks of daylight around the blinds. Harvey checked his watch: it was a little after nine.

The call was from Natasha. She sounded tense. "How soon can you get in here, Harv?"

Harvey tumbled out of bed. "I thought you had a meeting with the Defence people at nine?"

"I've had it," she replied quickly. "I think you need to get here," she insisted, "as soon as you possibly can."

He was alarmed by the tremor in her voice. "What's going on, Tash? Where are we up to?"

There was a lengthy pause. "This thing's bigger than we thought, Harv; much bigger. Michaelson knows something about it, but he's being a bit cagey. He's agreed to a full briefing to let us in on what he knows, but he wants you there. He figures he might as well put you in the picture as well, save repeating himself." She seemed to sense his hesitancy. "It's okay, Harv. Michaelson's pretty pissed off—very pissed off, actually—that he didn't know anything about it; he's supposed to be told about anything involving national security. He rang Crawley while I was there. There's apparently an announcement about the lunar station already in the pipeline; it's going to be made public in a few days. Michaelson's demanded that Crawley give you a written guarantee of protection until then, on condition that we don't let the cat out of the bag. He's also insisted that you and I be given a full briefing. I said I thought you'd be agreeable to that. What do you think?"

Harvey felt a surge of relief. "Sounds fine. When?"

"Now."

"Where are you?"

"At the Department of Defence. You know where it is?"

"I'll find it. Will they let me in?"

There was a brief, muffled aside on the other end of the line. “Just tell them who you are,” Natasha said when she came back on the line. “They’ll let you through.”

Before he left, Harvey made two calls, one to his wife and one to Askin Herbert. He provided both with assurances of his well-being, and to Askin gave a quick update on his circumstances. Askin still had reservations. “It could be a trap,” he said. “They might just be trying to lure you in.”

Harvey shook his head, forgetting the phone in his hand. “I’ve known Tash a long time. She wouldn’t sell me out.”

“How’d she sound?”

Harvey considered. “I don’t know. A little nervous; excited, I suppose. Nothing to suggest a sell-out, if that’s what you mean.” He moved the phone to his other hand. “Look, Ask, I’m going with my instincts here. I think it’s okay. I know I’ve been a bit paranoid, but I’m not getting any warning bells with this. Anyway, I’m going to send you a copy of the disk, just in case. I’ll post it on my way across town. If anything goes wrong, use it as best you can.”

There was a brief pause. “Okay,” Askin said, “but remember to negotiate from strength. Don’t let anyone talk you out of getting to the bottom of this.”

4.

Harvey drove to the meeting in a positive frame of mind, stopping briefly to post the CD to Askin. As Natasha had promised, there were no problems at the Ministry of Defence; the soldier at the desk obligingly issued him a visitor’s pass and pointed him towards the elevators opposite. ‘Meeting’s on level two, sir: Room 209.’

The elevator deposited him in a long, narrow corridor of closed doors. He followed the signage to 209, and knocked. Harvey had never met the man who opened the door, but recognised him immediately as Paul Michaelson, the Shadow Minister for Defence. Harvey had only seen Michaelson on television, and was surprised by how short he was, and how haggard he looked.

“Come in, Mister Jenkins.”

Harvey entered the room. There were two other people in the room. Crawley, the Minister of Defence, sat in the far corner of the room, his heavy, squat figure in an oversized office chair. Another man - a tall, sandy-haired fellow – sat at the large, oak-veneer desk in the centre of the room, his neutral eyes unchanging as they drifted over the newcomer. Harvey turned immediately to Michaelson.

“Where’s Natasha?”

The politician’s eyes were evasive. “She was... called away. Something to do with her family, I believe.”

Harvey sensed an element of deceit in this explanation. He turned to leave, but the fair-haired stranger stood hurriedly and moved around the desk, blocking Harvey’s way. “Take it easy,

Mr Jennings, I can assure you your friend is safe. You'll be able to see her shortly. Please, we're merely seeking your co-operation." The quiet, self-assured American accent startled Harvey into momentary passivity, and the man took advantage of it to extend a strong, fine-boned hand. "Virgil Ryan, US Central Intelligence Agency."

Harvey, feeling slightly disoriented, took the proffered hand without thinking. Ryan's grip was firm and cool, without feeling.

"I can see you're a bit perplexed by all this. I'll explain further as we go along. But first, I need to speak to you, Mr Jennings, for two reasons." He indicated a single high-backed chair in front of the desk and offered Harvey to sit. When Harvey did so, Ryan resumed his place on the opposite side of the desk, from where he studied Harvey thoughtfully, resting his chin on his intertwined fingers. "It's clear", he said at last, "that you've stumbled, albeit inadvertently, on a project of major strategic importance to the United States, and I need to ask you – and I emphasise 'ask' – if there's anything further you know about the project that we may not be aware of, or anyone you might have told who could be a risk to its security. If so, we may need to locate them as soon as possible, for their own protection as much as anything else. At this stage, anyone who has knowledge of the project, outside the authorised personnel, is at grave risk. The project's nearing completion; no-one will be inconvenienced for long."

This torrent of words, and the candour of the admissions it contained, left Harvey momentarily dumbfounded. Before he could muster his thoughts, Ryan went on: "Which brings me to my second reason for wanting to speak with you." He indicated Crawley and Michaelson. "I've been asked by my colleagues here to provide you with a full briefing on the project, to put your mind at rest. I'm sure when you get a bit more background, you'll understand the sensitivity about security." He paused. "So perhaps we'd better deal with the second matter first. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about the project."

Harvey asked the first question that came into his head. "Did you try to kill me?"

"Scare you, really." Ryan replied without hesitation. "Trust me, if we still wanted you dead, you would be." He waited for a moment, as if expecting a reaction, but when Harvey remained silent, apparently unsurprised, he went on: "Our orders were to silence anybody who gained knowledge of what was going on. We couldn't take any chances on word getting out."

Still Harvey gave no response. "And Grimes?"

The American sighed. "Mister Grimes' news, like yours, was unfortunately premature. And he was determined to make an issue of it. Shooting the messenger was the only way to go."

"So is that why I'm here?" Harvey asked wryly. "To be shot?"

"No," Ryan replied. "Although I must confess, when we realised you were intent on pursuing the matter, we were gearing up to have you removed. It was the decision to make the project public that saved you - the announcement."

"Announcement?"

"Of the project's readiness for application." He smiled benignly at Harvey. "I can't disclose precisely when that will be, but I can assure you it's imminent. After that, we don't expect

security to be an issue. Given that the need for secrecy is now for a very limited period, it's been decided to adopt an alternative risk management strategy; in most cases, at least, we're letting people live." He stopped, frowning, tilting his pinched, avian head as he studied Harvey. "I have to say, Mr Jennings, you seem to be taking all this pretty calmly."

Harvey elected to say nothing. When he'd called on Askin before leaving, the two of them had constructed various scenarios around the events following Harvey's discovery, and discussed the implications in some detail. Ryan's explanation merely confirmed the darkest of these possibilities: that, in the kind of scenario the American was outlining, individuals, however innocent or benign, were entirely expendable. He wondered if Ryan's people knew about Askin, about the CD Harvey had left with him.

The American's suggested a break for coffee, and asked Michaelson to order it, leaving no doubt as to the Shadow Minister's peripheral role. Crawley stayed in the corner, saying nothing. Ryan unclasped his hands and placed them evenly on the table, staring at them for a moment before looking up. "Do you watch the news, Mister Jennings? Read the newspapers; keep an eye on the big picture?"

"I'm an astronomer," Harvey replied sardonically. "I'm used to looking at the big picture."

"But what about the world? I assume you have some idea what's going on out there?"

"I thought so – at least until this cropped up."

Ryan ignored the remark. "Incredible advances, miraculous technology, almost limitless opportunities for the human race. But side by side with that, unprecedented violence, rampant terrorism, military confrontation."

"So what makes this... project any different?" Harvey asked derisively. "It's a military facility, isn't it? It's part of the same scenario."

The American studied him carefully. "Suppose I was to say to you that we could put an end to that, Mister Jennings, for good and all; that we could make war obsolete? What would you say to that?"

"I'd say it was fanciful," Harvey replied. "Every tin-pot military dictatorship in history has tried the same thing, and not one of them has succeeded. Basically, nothing's changed."

"Absolutely right," Ryan agreed enthusiastically. "Absolutely right in one sense, but absolutely wrong in another. One thing that hasn't changed – and I'm sure that as an astronomer you'll agree – is the size of the planet we live on. That's all the territory we've got. Every day, there are more and more of us on this finite piece of real estate, all competing for survival. In that respect, nothing's changed. But on another level, things *have* changed. Technology, for instance; technology above all. Technology has *shrunk* our world, to the point where, to all intents and purposes, all parts of it can be reached instantaneously. Think of it: the web, mobile communications technology; the satellite network. Technology offers us a gift."

The American paused, then went on: "But you're right, of course; people haven't changed their fundamental assumptions. We still think tribally, still compete with one another. So we use

our gift for the wrong purposes, for the endless succession of wars we wage against one another. And not only that: the abuse of technology has made the conflicts worse, increased their destructive potential.”

Harvey squeezed in a question. “You still haven’t answered the question: what makes you any different? Isn’t this project just more of the same?”

Ryan shook his head, as if sympathetically acknowledging the ignorance of a child. “Think back to your constant, Mr Jennings, the size of the Earth. Remember what I said about instantaneous technology? Well, the project we’re talking about is just that; it gives us constant surveillance of the Earth, including the military and communications networks, without risk of attack or reprisal. It isn’t weaponry in itself, but it’s part of the core nervous system that controls it. I suppose it’s what you might call a decisive strategic advantage.”

There was a moment’s silence. “Peace by force of arms,” Harvey said at last.

“I suppose you could look at it like that,” Ryan agreed. “I know there’s no power on the planet that can compete with it, including the Russians and Chinese, and once we demonstrate that, they’ll fall into line like everybody else. We don’t expect a confrontation.” He studied Harvey’s face for a moment and smiled. “Does it shock you, Harvey, the thought of some benevolent dictatorship ruling the Earth? It shouldn’t; the concept’s been around for a long time. And when you think about it, why not? Realistically, you have to admit it’s better than what we’ve got now. In principle, it’s not so different from the UN model, or even the Global Village idea.”

“But with different management”, Harvey proffered, unable to keep a tenor of sarcasm from creeping into his voice. “The United States and its allies.”

Ryan didn’t flinch. “Who else? Moscow? Beijing? The Muslim Fundamentalists? Western capitalism doesn’t look so bad by comparison.” His thoughts seemed to linger on the proposition for a moment, then moved on. “Anyway, this isn’t just a US venture; it’s much bigger than that. It represents a broad consensus of interests who want a world where we can just go about our business, have a bit of stability.”

“A New World Order?” Harvey observed, half-mockingly.

“Why not?” Ryan conceded reasonably. “It’s true that great powers – empires - have arisen and fallen in the past; but that’s only because none of them have had the means to prevail globally, to oversee the development of a universal world view. This time it’s different; this time it’s actually going to happen.” He leaned back in his chair. “Genesis is not so much the ultimate weapon, Mr Jennings, as the ultimate peacemaker.”

“Genesis?”

“Yes. That’s the name we’ve given to the project: Genesis; a new beginning. Appropriate, don’t you think?”

So how do you propose to bring this miracle about?” Harvey asked. “A pre-emptive strike of some kind, orchestrated from the moon?”

Ryan smiled again. “We don’t envisage a need for that. The Russians and Chinese are a pragmatic people; they understand strength, and they’d rather negotiate than fight, especially when they know they can’t win. We expect they’ll co-operate, once they understand the situation.”

“And if they don’t?” Harvey retorted, “What then?”

Ryan sighed. “Then they’ll need to be convinced,” he said matter-of-factly. “You remember Nagasaki, Hiroshima, the atomic bomb? Genesis can unleash a co-ordinated power immeasurably greater than that. If we need to demonstrate that, then so be it; but it’s not the way we want to go. It’s unnecessary. Like I said, we’re hoping reason will prevail.”

“Peace everlasting,” Harvey said flatly.

“Oh, there’ll still be arguments between neighbours from time to time, of course there will,” Ryan assured him. “But without weapons, and with Genesis looking down from above, as it were, people are going to have to sort it out some other way – negotiation, communication, compromise.”

Harvey considered for a moment, then asked: “So why the big announcement? This sort of thing usually happens in secret, doesn’t it? Why let the world in on it before the likely opposition formally surrenders?”

Ryan’s brow furrowed. “Let’s say it’s a matter of credibility. We want people with us on this, a sense of common purpose. People are more switched on to world affairs these days, and we need to show them that we’re above board, and we’re prepared to be reasonable. We want the whole human community involved in the process, as the first step towards a common global future.”

Aware that he had begun to proselytise, Ryan signed off on his discourse. “So, there it is, Mister Jennings, that’s what we’re looking at. A new beginning - Genesis.” He leaned back in his chair, as if well satisfied with his efforts. “Personally, I’ll be glad when the whole thing’s out in the open. It’s too big for us to keep a lid on for much longer anyway.”

There was a lengthy silence. “So, what happened?” Harvey asked. “With me, I mean. If this system’s so infallible, why did I pick up the signal? I’d hardly call that fool-proof.”

“Normally you wouldn’t have picked it up at all. The technology’s good enough to evade most receivers, even installations like yours; not even a blip on the track these days. It was a glitch with one of the encryptors that let it through. You just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Crawley spoke for the first time. “Now, what about your side of the bargain, Harvey? Is there anything you’ve got to tell us; anything you know, anyone you might have spoken to that we don’t already know about?”

Harvey thought for a moment before replying. He recounted the details of his discovery once again, faithfully recalling all the actions he’d taken except the couple of exchanges he’d had with Askin. There was no way of telling whether Ryan and his agency knew about these, but in the end he decided to take the risk.

Ryan appeared to take his statements at face value, and the interview petered out. The coffee arrived. Harvey was grateful for it, and drank quickly; but as he did so, a heavy, almost irresistible fatigue began to hum through his body. Through the creeping tiredness, he remembered Natasha and asked again about her.

The American's face seemed to swell a little as he leaned towards Harvey. "As I said before, Harvey, she's safe, as safe as she can be until this is over. You'll be with her shortly."

The tingling anaesthesia had spread through Harvey's limbs, defeating his efforts to rise from his chair. He attempted to call out, but managed only a scarcely decipherable moan. "What's happening?"

Ryan's reply was distant, as if delivered through an echo chamber. "We're just making sure our bases are covered, Mr Jennings, that's all." He appeared to surge forward, then swayed a little and went out of focus, his voice fading. "We're just putting you out of the picture for a while."

5.

Askin Herbert went to the door of the garage and looked out. Apart from the loaded van, nothing seemed out of place: the moon was full, the sky clear. Yet it had happened - was unfolding even as he stood there: the unthinkable scenario that had stalked the human race for almost a century.

There'd been no announcement. The so-called 'Western Alliance' had launched its attack without warning, intending to cripple the military infrastructure of its primary target, China. But the Alliance had overestimated the decisiveness of their weaponry, and underestimated the tenacity of the Chinese people. It was as if they'd long been preparing for such a reckoning, and had developed a response strategy long before the attack came; the practices and mindset instilled into the psyche of several generations had paid off. The Chinese had taken the damage but rallied, and in concert with their allies in the region had moved with overwhelming force against Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

Within days, there'd been seemingly orchestrated social, political and ultimately military upheavals in the Balkans and the Middle East, with armed clashes along the borders of Israel and a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Alliance didn't know which way to turn, but in the end they'd decided to go for broke: nuclear strikes on a dozen or so 'strategic' targets around the globe, including Teheran, Shanghai and Petrograd.

In the week or so since these attacks, information had become patchy. News had been largely filtered, but there'd been substantive reports via social media of further nuclear strikes in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, with differing opinions about responsibility.

In a matter of days, the northern coast of Australia had become a theatre in the conflict. The 'frontline' had moved south into Malaysia and Indonesia; New Guinea had been abandoned by the Alliance and a haphazard evacuation of Darwin was underway. A general mobilisation had been ordered, and most of the able population of the country was being drafted into hastily-formed regional defence units.

Askin had made a long-term practice of studying and monitoring the ebb and flow of geopolitical events, and thus could foresee with some accuracy their future course: the rapid escalation towards total war, a conflict that would go on until annihilation or some other kind of catastrophic consequence stopped it. He understood that he was witnessing some kind of end game, and he'd prepared for it.

He looked at his watch. They'd be coming for him soon, maybe within hours, wanting to know why he hadn't registered for enlistment. He'd have to be gone by then. They'd all have to be gone, Angela and their kids as well, gone into hiding. The militia was shooting people out of hand who defied conscription, or anyone who might have assisted them. The ruthlessness didn't surprise Askin: he'd become used to thinking that way since Harvey and Natasha had disappeared.

It'd been two weeks since anyone had heard from them, and he'd come to accept the worst. Before the mystery surrounding their abrupt disappearance had been swallowed up in the mayhem that followed the American strike, news that the pair was missing had caused something of a public sensation; they were reasonably high-profile people, after all, and their disappearance was fertile soil for rumour. The prevalent theory, quickly seized upon by the mass media, was that they'd been having some kind of illicit relationship, and that the whole 'vanishing act' had been stage-managed. Before the social media networks went down, speculation of foul play had been raised here and there, but it never got much traction: according to the police, there was no evidence of foul play, and the records of the Minister of Defence indicated that the pair had never shown up at the department.

Askin felt in the pocket of his jacket for the CD Harvey had given him. *I should have used it earlier*, he thought, *as soon as I began to suspect something*. In the first few days after Harvey and Natasha had vanished, it might have made a difference. But he didn't know for sure then, and waiting had seemed like a reasonable option.

His wife joined him on the verandah, and they stood for a while in silence. "It's going to be cold tonight," she said at last.

"Yes."

There was another brief pause. She glanced around the yard, at the gardens and the bush. "I'm going to miss all this."

"Yes." He encircled her waist.

"It's a beautiful moon... despite everything."

Askin looked up again at the huge opal orb. "Yes," he said again.

After a while she unfolded herself. "I'd better get the kids. They're going to need to be well wrapped up."

She went back inside. Askin continued staring up at the moon for a moment, then found his keys and went quickly down the steps to the waiting vehicle.